

Wings can be very symbolic of ultimate freedom, that potential to take flight and rise above it all — Silke Raetze

From the depths, to paradise

Jennifer Bennett

WHAT you see on display at the Australian Museum is not even a tenth of what it holds in its basement.

For every roaring dinosaur skeleton or lump of crystal, there are dozens more specimens in the depths.

Woollahra artist Silke Raetze has spent the past few months in close company with some of the museum's hidden treasures and the results are about to go on display as part of the *Rituals of Seduction: Birds of Paradise* exhibition.

Ms Raetze, 35, has for years sketched the displays at the museum, but eventually decided she wanted to take a closer look at what it held.

A request for more access over a three-month period saw her invited behind the scenes, spending a day a week in the basement with the specimens as part of the museum's first artist's residency.

"They asked me what area I was interested in, and at that point I'd done a lot of dragonfly and butterfly wings, and I wanted to keep looking at wings," she said. "They said, 'Well, we have this show coming up called *Birds of Paradise*, would that do?', and of the birds they're the most spectacular, so I said yes."

"I've always been intrigued by wings

SEE IT UP CLOSE

Rituals and Seduction:

■ *Birds of Paradise* runs from April 9 until August 7 at the Australian Museum, 6 College St, Sydney.

■ Ms Raetze's work, including pieces from the exhibition, can also be seen at Michael Reid Gallery, 44 Roslyn Gardens, Elizabeth Bay.

and animals' capacity for flight," she said. "Wings can be very symbolic of ultimate freedom, that potential to take flight and rise above it all."

The birds, found in New Guinea and Northern Australia, are known for their brilliant plumage and long flowing tails, so Ms Raetze's works include coloured ink and pencil drawings, and paper sculptures evoking their feathers, and bright silk-screen prints.

"(While) I was at the museum I made these very detailed drawings. They'd give me different birds every day," she said.

"Many of the birds are over 100 years old and many of them are becoming more threatened (in the wild), so I felt very privileged that they let me have these things."



Silke Raetze is the first artist in residence at the Australian Museum.

Picture: JOHN APPLEYARD